# NEW BALLADS

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New Ballads

BY JOHN DAVIDSON

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# NEW BALLADS

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JOHN LANE
THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON & NEW YORK
1897

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Some said, 'He was strong.' He was weak ;
For he never could sing or speak
Of the things beneath or the things above,
Till his soul was touched by death or love.

Some said, 'He was weak.' They were wrong;
For the soul must be strong
That can break into song
Of the things beneath and the things above,
At the stroke of death, at the touch of love.

## A BALLAD OF AN ARTIST'S WIFE

'Sweet wife, this heavy-hearted age
Is nought to us; we two shall look
To Art, and fill a perfect page
In Life's ill-written doomsday book.'

He wrought in colour; blood and brain
Gave fire and might; and beauty grew
And flowered with every magic stain
His passion on the canvas threw.

They shunned the world and worldly ways:
He laboured with a constant will;
But few would look, and none would praise,
Because of something lacking still.

After a time her days with sighs
And tears o'erflowed; for blighting need
Bedimmed the lustre of her eyes,
And there were little mouths to feed.

'My bride shall ne'er be common-place,
He thought, and glanced; and glanced again:
At length he looked her in the face;
And lo, a woman old and plain!

About this time the world's heart failed—
The lusty heart no fear could rend;
In every land wild voices wailed,
And prophets prophesied the end.

'To-morrow or to-day,' he thought,
'May be Eternity; and I
Have neither felt nor fashioned aught
That makes me unconcerned to die.

'With care and counting of the cost
My life a sterile waste has grown,
Wherein my better dreams are lost
Like chaff in the Sahara sown.

'I must escape this living tomb!
My life shall yet be rich and free,
And on the very stroke of Doom
My soul at last begin to be.

'Wife, children, duty, household fires
For victims of the good and true!
For me my infinite desires,
Freedom and things untried and new!

'I would encounter all the press
Of thought and feeling life can show,
The sweet embrace, the aching stress
Of every earthly joy and woe;

'And from the world's impending wreck
And out of pain and pleasure weave
Beauty undreamt of, to bedeck
The Festival of Doomsday Eve.'

He fled, and joined a motley throng
That held carousal day and night;
With love and wit, with dance and song,
They snatched a last intense delight.

Passion to mould an age's art,
Enough to keep a century sweet,
Was in an hour consumed; each heart
Lavished a life in every beat.

Amazing beauty filled the looks
Of sleepless women; music bore
New wonder on its wings; and books
Throbbed with a thought unknown before.

The sun began to smoke and flare
Like a spent lamp about to die;
The dusky moon tarnished the air;
The planets withered in the sky.

Earth reeled and lurched upon her road;
Tigers were cowed, and wolves grew tame;
Seas shrank, and rivers backward flowed,
And mountain-ranges burst in flame.

The artist's wife, a soul devout,
To all these things gave little heed;
For though the sun was going out,
There still were little mouths to feed.

And there were also shrouds to stitch,
And chares to do; with all her might,
To feed her babes, she served the rich
And kept her useless tears till night.

But by-and-by her sight grew dim ;
Her strength gave way ; in desperate mood
She laid her down to die. 'Tell him,'
She sighed, 'I fed them while I could.'

The children met a wretched fate ;
Self-love was all the vogue and vaunt,
And charity gone out of date ;
Wherefore they pined and died of want.

Aghast he heard the story : 'Dead !
All dead in hunger and despair !
I courted misery,' he said ;
'But here is more than I can bear.'

Then, as he wrought, the stress of woe
Appeared in many a magic stain ;
And all adored his work, for lo,
Tears mingled now with blood and brain !

'Look, look!' they cried; 'this man can weave
Beauty from anguish that appals;'
And at the feast of Doomsday Eve
They hung his pictures in their halls,

And gazed; and came again between
The faltering dances eagerly;
They said, 'The loveliest we have seen,
The last, of man's work, we shall see!'

Then was there neither death nor birth;
Time ceased; and through the ether fell
The smoky sun, the leprous earth—
A cinder and an icicle.

No wrathful vials were unsealed;
Silent, the first things passed away:
No terror reigned; no trumpet pealed
The dawn of Everlasting Day.

The bitter draught of sorrow's cup
  Passed with the seasons and the years;
And Wisdom dried for ever up
  The deep, old fountainhead of tears.

Out of the grave and ocean's bed
  The artist saw the people rise;
And all the living and the dead
  Were borne aloft to Paradise.

He came where on a silver throne
  A spirit sat for ever young;
Before her Seraphs worshipped prone,
  And Cherubs silver censers swung.

He asked, 'Who may this martyr be?
  What votaress of saintly rule?'
A Cherub said, 'No martyr; she
  Had one gift; she was beautiful.'

Then came he to another bower
Where one sat on a golden seat,
Adored by many a heavenly Power
With golden censers smoking sweet.

'This was some gallant wench who led
Faint-hearted folk and set them free?'
'Oh no! a simple maid,' they said,
'Who spent her life in charity.'

At last he reached a mansion blest
Where on a diamond throne, endued
With nameless beauty, one possessed
Ineffable beatitude.

The praises of this matchless soul
The sons of God proclaimed aloud;
From diamond censers odours stole;
And Hierarchs before her bowed.

'Who was she?' God Himself replied:
'In misery her lot was cast;
She lived a woman's life, and died
Working My work until the last.'

It was his wife. He said, 'I pray
Thee, Lord, despatch me now to Hell.'
But God said, 'No; here shall you stay,
And in her peace for ever dwell.'

## SPRING SONG

About the flowerless land adventurous bees
Pickeering hum; the rooks debate, divide,
With many a hoarse aside,
In solemn conclave on the budding trees;
Larks in the skies and ploughboys o'er the leas
Carol as if the winter ne'er had been;
The very owl comes out to greet the sun;
Rivers high-hearted run;
And hedges mantle with a flush of green.

The curlew calls me where the salt winds blow;
His troubled note dwells mournfully and dies;
Then the long echo cries

Deep in my heart. Ah, surely I must go!
For there the tides, moon-haunted, ebb and
flow;
And there the seaboard murmurs resonant;
The waves their interwoven fugue repeat
And brooding surges beat
A slow, melodious, continual chant.

## A NORTHERN SUBURB

NATURE selects the longest way,
And winds about in tortuous grooves ;
A thousand years the oaks decay ;
The wrinkled glacier hardly moves.

But here the whetted fangs of change
Daily devour the old demesne—
The busy farm, the quiet grange,
The wayside inn, the village green.

In gaudy yellow brick and red,
With rooting pipes, like creepers rank,
The shoddy terraces o'erspread
Meadow, and garth, and daisied bank.

With shelves for rooms the houses crowd,
Like draughty cupboards in a row—
Ice-chests when wintry winds are loud,
Ovens when summer breezes blow.

Roused by the fee'd policeman's knock,
And sad that day should come again,
Under the stars the workmen flock
In haste to reach the workmen's train.

For here dwell those who must fulfil
Dull tasks in uncongenial spheres,
Who toil through dread of coming ill,
And not with hope of happier years—

The lowly folk who scarcely dare
Conceive themselves perhaps misplaced,
Whose prize for unremitting care
Is only not to be disgraced.

## A WOMAN AND HER SON

'HAS he come yet?' the dying woman asked.

'No,' said the nurse. 'Be quiet.'

'When he comes
Bring him to me: I may not live an hour.'

'Not if you talk. Be quiet.'

'When he comes
Bring him to me.'

'Hush, will you!'

Night came down.
The cries of children playing in the street

Suddenly rose more voluble and shrill;
Ceased, and broke out again; and ceased and broke
In eager prate; then dwindled and expired.

'Across the dreary common once I saw
The moon rise out of London like a ghost.
Has the moon risen? Is he come?'

'Not yet.
Be still, or you will die before he comes.'

The working-men with heavy iron tread,
The thin-shod clerks, the shopmen neat and plump
Home from the city came. On muddy beer
The melancholy mean suburban street
Grew maudlin for an hour; pianos waked
In dissonance from dreams of rusty peace,

And unpitched voices quavered tedious songs
Of sentiment infirm or nerveless mirth.

'Has he come yet?'

'Be still or you will die!'

And when the hour of gaiety had passed,
And the poor revellers were gone to bed,
The moon among the chimneys wandering long
Escaped at last, and sadly overlooked
The waste raw land where doleful suburbs thrive.

Then came a firm quick step—measured but quick;
And then a triple knock that shook the house
And brought the plaster down.

'My son!' she cried.
'Bring him to me!'

He came ; the nurse went out.

'Mother, I thought to spare myself this pain,'
He said at once, 'but that was cowardly.
And so I come to bid you try to think,
To understand at last.'

'Still hard, my son ?'

'Hard as the nether millstone.'

'But I hope
To soften you,' she said, 'before I die.'

'And I to see you harden with a hiss
As life goes out in the cold bath of death.
Oh, surely now your creed will set you free
For one great moment, and the universe
Flash on your intellect as power, power, power,
Knowing not good or evil, God or sin,

But only everlasting yea and nay.
Is weakness greatness? No, a thousand times!
Is force the greatest? Yes, for ever yes!
Be strong, be great, now you have come to die.'

'My son, you seem to me a kind of prig.'

'How can I get it said? Think, mother, think!
Look back upon your fifty wretched years
And show me anywhere the hand of God.
Your husband saving souls—O, paltry souls
That need salvation!—lost the grip of things,
And left you penniless with none to aid
But me the prodigal. Back to the start!
An orphan girl, hurt, melancholy, frail,
Before you learned to play, your toil began:
That might have been your making, had the weight
Of drudgery, the unsheathed fire of woe

Borne down and beat on your defenceless life:
Souls shrivel up in these extremes of pain,
Or issue diamonds to engrave the world;
But yours before it could be made or marred,
Plucked from the burning, saved by faith, became
Inferior as a thing of paste that hopes
To pass for real in heaven's enduing light.
You married then a crude evangelist,
Whose soul was like a wafer that can take
One single impress only.'

'Oh, my son!
Your father!'

'He, my father! These are times
When all must to the crucible—no thought,
Practice, or use, or custom sacro-sanct

But shall be violable now. And first
If ever we evade the wonted round,
The stagnant vortex of the eddying years,
The child must take the father by the beard,
And say, "What did you in begetting me?"'

'I will not listen!'

'But you shall, you must—
You cannot help yourself. Death in your eyes
And voice, and I to torture you with truth,
Even as your preachers for a thousand years
Pestered with falsehood souls of dying folk.
Look at the man, your husband. Of the soil;
Broad, strong, adust; head, massive; eyes of steel;
Yet some way ailing, for he understood
But one idea, and he married you.'

The dying woman sat up straight in bed;

A ghastly blush glowed on her yellow cheek,
And flame broke from her eyes, but words came
not.

The son's pent wrath burnt on. 'He married
you;
You were his wife, his servant; cheerfully
You bore him children; and your house was hell.
Unwell, half-starved, and clad in cast-off clothes,
We had no room, no sport; nothing but fear
Of our evangelist, whose little purse
Opened to all save us; who squandered smiles
On wily proselytes, and gloomed at home.
You had eight children; only three grew up:
Of these, one died bedrid, and one insane,
And I alone am left you. Think of it!
It matters nothing if a fish, a plant
Teem with waste offspring, but a conscious womb!

Eight times you bore a child, and in fierce throes,
For you were frail and small: of all your love,
Your hopes, your passion, not a memory steals
To smooth your dying pillow, only I
Am here to rack you. Where does God appear?'

'God shall appear,' the dying woman said.
'God has appeared; my heart is in his hand.
Were there no God, no Heaven!—Oh, foolish boy!
You foolish fellow! Pain and trouble here
Are God's benignest providence—the whip
And spur to Heaven. But joy was mine below—
I am unjust to God—great joy was mine:
Which makes Heaven sweeter too; because if earth
Afford such pleasure in mortality
What must immortal happiness be like!

Eight times I was a mother. Frail and small?
Yes; but the passionate, courageous mate
Of a strong man. Oh, boy! You paltry boy!
Hush! Think! Think—you! Eight times I
bore a child,
Eight souls for God! In Heaven they wait for me—
My husband and the seven. I see them all!
And two are children still—my little ones!
While I have sorrowed here, shrinking sometimes
From that which was decreed, my Father, God,
Was storing Heaven with treasure for me. Hush!
My dowry in the skies! God's thoughtfulness!
I see it all! Lest Heaven might, unalloyed,
Distress my shy soul, I leave earth in doubt
Of your salvation: something to hope and fear
Until I get accustomed to the peace
That passeth understanding. When you come—
For you will come, my son. . . .'

Her strength gave out ;
She sank down panting, bathed in tears and sweat.

'Could I but touch your intellect,' he cried,
'Before you die! Mother, the world is mad :
This castle in the air, this Heaven of yours,
Is the lewd dream of morbid vanity.
For each of us death is the end of all ;
And when the sun goes out the race of men
Shall cease for ever. It is ours to make
This farce of fate a splendid tragedy :
Since we must be the sport of circumstance,
We should be sportsmen, and produce a breed
Of gallant creatures, conscious of their doom,
Marching with lofty brows, game to the last.
Oh good and evil, heaven and hell are lies!
But strength is great : there is no other truth :

This is the yea-and-nay that makes men hard.
Mother, be hard and happy in your death.'

'What do you say? I hear the waters roll. . .'
Then, with a faint cry, striving to arise—
'After I die I shall come back to you,
And then you must believe; you must believe,
For I shall bring you news of God and Heaven!'

He set his teeth, and saw his mother die.
Outside a city-reveller's tipsy tread
Severed the silence with a jagged rent;
The tall lamps flickered through the sombre street,
With yellow light hiding the stainless stars:
In the next house a child awoke and cried;
Far off a clank and clash of shunting trains
Broke out and ceased, as if the fettered world

Started and shook its irons in the night;
Across the dreary common citywards,
The moon, among the chimneys sunk again,
Cast on the clouds a shade of smoky pearl.

And when her funeral day had come, her son,
Before they fastened down the coffin lid,
Shut himself in the chamber, there to gaze
Upon her dead face, hardening his heart.
But as he gazed, into the smooth wan cheek
Life with its wrinkles shot again; the eyes
Burst open, and the bony fingers clutched
The coffin sides; the woman raised herself,
And owl-like in her shroud blinked on the light.

'Mother, what news of God and Heaven?' he asked.

Feeble and strange, her voice came from afar :
'I am not dead : I must have been asleep.'

'Do not imagine that. You lay here dead—
Three days and nights, a corpse. Life has come back :
Often it does, although faint-hearted folk
Fear to admit it : none of those who die,
And come to life again, can ever tell
Of any bourne from which they have returned :
Therefore they were not dead, your casuists say.
The ancient jugglery that tricks the world !
You lay here dead, three days and nights. What news ?
"After I die I shall come back to you,
And then you must believe"—these were your words—
"For I shall bring you news of God and Heaven."'

She cast a look forlorn about the room :
The door was shut ; the worn venetian, down ;
And stuffy sunlight through the dusty slats
Spotted the floor, and smeared the faded walls.
He with his strident voice and eyes of steel
Stood by relentless.

'I remember, dear,'
She whispered, 'very little. When I died
I saw my children dimly bending down,
The little ones in front, to beckon me,
A moment in the dark ; and that is all.'

'That was before you died—the last attempt
Of fancy to create the heart's desire.
Now mother, be courageous ; now, be hard.'

'What must I say or do, my dearest son ?
Oh me, the deep discomfort of my mind !

Come to me, hold me, help me to be brave,
And I shall make you happy if I can,
For I have none but you—none anywhere . . .
Mary, the youngest, whom you never saw
Looked out of Heaven first: her little hands. . .
Three days and nights, dead, and no memory! . . .
A poor old creature dying a second death,
I understand the settled treachery,
The plot of love and hope against the world.
Fearless, I gave myself at nature's call;
And when they died, my children, one by one,
All sweetly in my heart I buried them.
Who stole them while I slept? Where are they all?
My heart is eerie, like a rifled grave
Where silent spiders spin among the dust,
And the wind moans and laughs under its breath.

But in a drawer. . . . What is there in the drawer?
No pressure of a little rosy hand
Upon a faded cheek—nor anywhere
The seven fair stars I made. Oh love the cheat!
And hope, the radiant devil pointing up,
Lest men should cease to give the couple sport
And end the world at once! For three days dead—
Here in my coffin; and no memory!
Oh, it is hard! But I—I, too, am hard . . .
Be hard, my son, and steep your heart of flesh
In stony waters till it grows a stone,
Or love and hope will hack it with blunt knives
As long as it can feel.'

He, holding her,

With sobs and laughter spoke: his mind had snapped
Like a frayed string o'erstretched: 'Mother, rejoice;
For I shall make you glad. There is no heaven
Your children are resolved to dust and dew:
But, mother, I am God. I shall create
The heaven of your desires. There must be heaven
For mothers and their babes. Let heaven be now!'.

They found him conjuring chaos with mad words
And brandished hands across his mother's corpse.

Thus did he see her harden with a hiss

As life went out in the cold bath of death;
Thus did she soften him before she died:
For both were bigots—fateful souls that plague
The gentle world.

## A SONG OF THE ROAD

Among the hills he woke ;
  A star, low-hung and late,
Dwindled as the morning broke
  The sable-silvered state
Wherein night braves the ruddy stroke
  That daily seals her fate.

He went by bank and brae
  Where fern and heather spread ;
Azure bells beset the way,
  And blossoms gold and red ;
Below, the burn sang all the day ;
  The larks sang overhead.

He left the hills and came
Among the woods and dells;
Golden helmets flashed like flame;
The witches wove their spells;
In moss-green silk the elfin dame
Rode by with silver bells.

He came where four roads met;
He chose a narrow one;
Spiny thorns the way beset;
But at the end there shone
The bright reward that pilgrims get,
And Heaven's unsetting sun.

He went with heavy mind,
For sharp the thorns did sting.
Far and fitfully behind
He heard sweet laughter ring—

Delighted voices on the wind,
And freshness of the spring.

He paused in sore dismay,
And, pondering right and wrong,
Turned and left the narrow way
To join the pleasant throng,
That wandered happily astray
The primrose path along.

Alas! he fled once more;
For at the end a cloud,
Streaked with flame, and stained with gore,
And torn with curses loud,
O'erhung a melancholy shore
And veiled a hopeless crowd.

He followed then the road
Wherein at first he hied;

Soon he came where men abode
And loved, and wrought, and died ;
And straight the Broad and Narrow ways,
Heaven fair and Hell obscene,
For ever vanished out of space,
Spectres that ne'er had been.

## A HIGHWAY PIMPERNEL

Blossoms and buds, purple or pale,
In saffron kerchiefs or watchet snoods,
Linger in ditches, crowd in the dale,
In passionate tempers, or languorous moods,
High on the hill, deep in the vale,
Over the fences and into the woods!

Richer and sweeter far than the rest,
On the edge of the rut the cart-wheels chafe,
Like a fairy-buoy on a billow's crest,
Hangs a wonderful little waif:
A pimpernel, clutching the earth's warm breast,
Rocked by the traffic and sleeping safe.

All the morning in crimson state
It flashed and glowed with zeal entire.
All the morning, steady as fate,
Aflame with courage and high desire,
It watched the sun, its skyey mate,
Lighting the world with golden fire

But not a petal now will budge—
Fast asleep since the stroke of noon!
And weary beggar and hawker trudge
Grazing its leaves with their mouldy shoon,
And wheels and hoofs go by with a grudge
To think that a flower should rest so soon!

## A BALLAD OF EUTHANASIA

In magic books she read at night,
And found all things to be
A spectral pageant brought to light
By nameless sorcery.

'Bethink you, now, my daughter dear,'
The King of Norway cried,
'Tis summer, and your twentieth year—
High time you were a bride!

'The sunlight lingers o'er the wold
By night; the stars above
With passion throb like hearts of gold;
The whole world is in love.'

The scornful princess laughed and said,
'This love you praise, I hate.
Oh, I shall never, never wed;
For men degenerate.

'The sun grows dim on heaven's brow;
The world's worn blood runs cold;
Time staggers in his dotage now;
Nature is growing old.

'Deluded by the summertime,
Must I with wanton breath
Whisper and sigh? I trow not!—I
Shall be the bride of Death.'

Fair princes came with gems of price,
And kings from lands afar.
'Jewels!' she said. 'I may not wed
Till Death comes with a star.'

At midnight when she ceased to read,
She pushed her lattice wide,
And saw the crested rollers lead
The vanguard of the tide.

The mighty host of waters swayed,
Commanded by the moon;
The wind a marching music made;
The surges chimed in tune.

But she with sudden-startled ears
O'erheard a ghostly sound—
Or drums that beat, or trampling feet,
Above or underground.

The mountain-side was girt about
With forests dark and deep.
'What meteor flashes in and out
Thridding the darksome steep?'

Soon light and sound reached level ground,
And lo, in blackest mail,
Along the shore a warrior
Rode on a war-horse pale!

And from his helm as on he came
A crescent lustre gleamed;
The charger's hoofs were shod with flame:
The wet sand hissed and steamed.

'He leaves me! Nay; he turns this way
From elfin lands afar.
''Tis Death!' she said. 'He comes to wed
His true love with a star!

'No ring for me, no blushing groom,
No love with all its ills,
No long-drawn life! I am the wife
Of Death, whose first kiss kills.'

The rider reached the city wall;
Over the gate he dashed;
Across the roofs the fire-shod hoofs
Like summer-lightning flashed.

Before her bower the pale horse pawed
The air, unused to rest;
The sable groom, he whispered 'Come!'
And stooped his shining crest.

She sprang behind him; on her brow
He placed his glowing star.
Back o'er the roofs the fire-shod hoofs
Like lightning flashed afar.

Through hissing sand and shrivelled grass
And flowers singed and dead,
By wood and lea, by stream and sea,
The pale horse panting sped.

At last as they beheld the morn
His sovereignty resume,
Deep in an ancient land forlorn
They reached a marble tomb.

They lighted down and entered in:
The tears, they brimmed her eyes;
She turned and took a lingering look,
A last look at the skies;

Then went with Death. Her lambent star
The sullen darkness lit
In avenues of sombre yews,
Where ghosts did peer and flit.

But soon the way grew light as day;
With wonderment and awe,
A golden land, a silver strand,
And grass-green hills she saw.

In gown and smock good country folk
In fields and meadows worked;
The salt seas wet the ruddy net
Where glistering fishes lurked.

The meads were strewn with purple flowers,
With every flower that blows;
And singing loud o'er cliff and cloud
The larks, the larks arose!

'The sun is bright on heaven's brow,
The world's fresh blood runs fleet;
Time is as young as ever now,
Nature as fresh and sweet,'

Her champion said; then through the wood
He led her to a bower;
He doffed his sable casque and stood
A young man in his flower

'Lo! I am Life, your lover true!'
He kissed her o'er and o'er.
And still she wist not what to do,
And still she wondered more.

And they were wed. The swift years sped
Till children's children laughed;
And joy and pain and joy again
Mixed in the cup they quaffed.

Upon their golden wedding day,
He said, 'How now, dear wife?'
Then she: 'I find the sweetest kind
Of Death is Love and Life,'

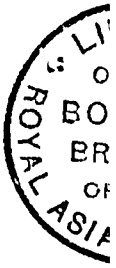
## SUNSET

By down and shore the South-west bore
The scent of hay, an airy load:
As if at fault it seemed to halt,
Then, softly whispering, took the road,
To haunt the evening like a ghost,
Or some belated pilgrim lost.

High overhead the slow clouds sped;
Beside the moon they furled their sails;
Soon in the skies their merchandise
Of vapour, built in toppling bales,
Fulfilled a visionary pier
That spanned the eastern atmosphere.

Low in the west the sun addressed
His courtship to the dark-browed night;
While images of molten seas,
Of snowy slope and crimson height,
Of valleys dim and gulfs profound
Aloft a dazzling pageant wound.

Where shadows fell in glade and dell
Uncovered shoulders nestled deep,
And here and there the braided hair
Of rosy goddesses asleep;
For in a moment clouds may be
Dead, and instinct with deity.



## WINTER RAIN

MOTIONLESS, leaden cloud
The region roofed and walled;
Beneath, a tempest shrieked aloud,
And the forest beckoned and called.

The blackthorn coppice was all ablaze,
And shot and garlanded,
With bronzed and wreathing bramble sprays,
And bright leaves green and red.

The dripping pollards their shock-heads hung,
And in the glistening shaws,
Lustres and glories of rubies, swung
The dark wet crimson haws.

The dead leaves pattered and stole about
  Like elves in the sheltered glades,
And rushed down the broad green rides and out
  O'er the fields in windy raids.

The motionless, leaden sky,
  Emptied itself amain,
And the angry east with hue and cry
  Dashed at the pouring rain.

The forest rocked and sang:
  Behind the passing blast
Far off the new blast faintly rang
  Arrived and roared, and passed,
In the liberty of the open sea
  To find a home at last.

## A BALLAD OF A POET BORN

Upon a ruddy ember eve
They feasted in the hall;
By custom bound they handed round
The harp to each and all.

While still the smoky rafters rang
With burdens loud and long,
There rose a blushing youth and sang
A wonderful new song.

For he had lounged among the flowers,
Beside the mountain streams,
Deep-dyeing all the rosy hours
With rosier waking dreams.

And lurked at night in seaside caves,
Or rowed o'er harbour-bars,
Companion of the winds and waves
Companion of the stars.

Therefore as searching sweet as musk
The words were and the tune,
The while he sang of dawn and dusk,
Of midnight and of noon.

'No longer shall more gifted lands
Cast hither words of scorn.
Behold!' they said, and clapped their hands,
'We have a poet born!

'Go forth with harp and scrip,' they cried,
'And sing by land and sea,
In lanes and streets; the world is wide
For errant minstrelsy.

'Accept their lot in every clime
Who win the poet's name,
Homeless and poor, but rich in rhyme,
And glittering with fame.'

'Forth would I go without all fear,
Gladly to meet my fate;
But in the house my mother dear
And my three sisters wait.

'My father's dead; my mother's eyes
Are overcast with woe;
I hear my sisters' hungry cries;
I dare not rise and go.'

They jeered him for a craven lout:
'What care is this of thine?
Thou speakest now, without a doubt,
Like some false Philistine!

'No poet can to others give:
Leave folk to starve alone.'
He said, 'I dare not while I live
She has no other son.'

His sweetheart whispered in his ear
'And me, love! what of me?'
He shook her off. 'Of you, enough,'
He sighed; 'I set you free.'

He herded sheep, he herded kine;
He rose before the day;
He ploughed and sowed and reaped and mowed,
To keep the wolf at bay.

His harp, it rusted on the wall;
His hands, his heart, grew hard;
The wine of life was turned to gall
Because the song was marred.

So stubborn the accursed soil,
  So poor his pastoral lore,
With all his weary task and toil
  The wolf still pawed the door.

His mother died uncomforted;
  His sisters, one by one,
By beggars born were wooed and wed,
  And all his hopes undone.

Haggard and worn he took his harp;
  The sun shone broad and low:
At dawn of night there shall be light;
  I now may rise and go.'

As he went o'er the plain he met
  The sweetheart of his youth:
Whither away at close of day?
  Now answer me in sooth.'

'My kin have left me; it is time
To win the poet's name;
Homeless and poor, but rich in rhyme,
I go to conquer fame.'

'Oh, once you throned me in your heart
All other maids above;
Sing to me here, before we part,
Your sweetest song of love.'

He said, 'I'll play and sing a lay
The sweetest ever sung.'
Then fumbled with his knotted hands
The rusty strings among.

His quivering lips gave forth no song,
His harp no silver sound;
Deep like a boy he blushed, and long
He looked upon the ground.

He gnashed his teeth : 'Hell has begun,'
He thought; 'I feel its blaze.'
With that he faced the setting sun,
And then the woman's gaze.

'We two,' she said, 'must never part
Till one shall reach death's goal.'
Her burning tears blistered his heart;
Her pity flayed his soul.

'Sweetheart,' she pled, 'we can unite
Life's torn and ravelled weft;
We yet may know love's deep delight :
I have some beauty left.'

'But I am old—half dead; alack!
I know the double loss
Of song and love!' He warned her back,
And broke his harp across.

She stretched her arms : her pleading eyes,
Her pleading blush were vain;
He fled towards the sunset skies
Across the shadowed plain.

For years he wandered far and near,
And begged in silence sad;
The children shrank from him in fear ;
The people called him mad.

Upon a ruddy ember eve
They feasted in the hall :
The old broken man, with no one's leave,
Sat down among them all.

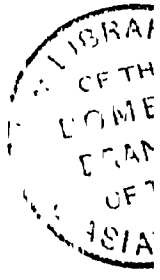
And while the swarthy rafters rang
With antique praise of wine,
There rose a conscious youth and sang
A ditty new and fine.

Of Fate's mills, and the human grist
They grind at, was his song;
He cursed the canting moralist
Who measures right and wrong.

'The earth, a flying tumour, wends
Through space all blotched and blown
With suns and worlds, with odds and ends
Of systems seamed and sewn:

'Beneath the sun it froths like yeast;
Its fiery essence flares;
It festers into man and beast;
It throbs with flowers and tares.

'Behold! 'tis but a heap of dust,
Kneaded by fire and flood;
While hunger fierce, and fiercer lust,
Drench it with tears and blood.



'Yet why seek after some new birth?
For surely, late or soon,
This ague-fit we call the earth
Shall be a corpse-cold moon.

'Why need we, lacking help and hope,
By fears and fancies tossed,
Vainly debate with ruthless Fate,
Fighting a battle lost?

'Fill high the bowl! We are the scum
Of matter; fill the bowl;
Drink scathe to him, and death to him,
Who dreams he has a soul.'

They clinked their cans and roared applause;
The singer swelled with pride.
'You sneer and carp! Give me the harp,'
The old man, trembling, cried.

They laughed and wondered, and grew still,
To see one so aghast
Smiting the chords; but all his skill
Came back to him at last.

And lo, as searching-sweet as musk
The words were and the tune,
The while he sang of dawn and dusk,
Of midnight and of noon;

Of heaven and hell, of times and tides;
Of wintry winds that blow,
Of spring that haunts the world and hides
Her flowers among the snow;

Of summer, rustling green and glad,
With blossoms purfled fair;
Of autumn's wine-stained mouth and sad,
Wan eyes, and golden hair;

Of Love, of Love, the wild sweet scent
Of flowers, and words, and lives,
And loyal Nature's urgent bent
Whereby the world survives;

Of magic Love that opes the ports
Of sense and soul, that saith
The moonlight's meaning, and extorts
The fealty of Death.

He sang of peace and work that bless
The simple and the sage;
He sang of hope and happiness,
He sang the Golden Age.

And the shamed listeners knew the spell
That still enchants the years,
When the world's commonplaces fell
In music on their ears.

'Go, bring a wreath of glossy bay
To place upon his head!
A poet born!' Woe worth the day,
They crowned a poet dead!

Dead, while upon the pulsing string
Still beat his early rhyme—
The song the poet born shall sing
Until the end of Time!

## SERENADE

(1250 A.D.)

WITH stars, with trailing galaxies,
Like a white-rose bower in bloom,
Darkness garlands the vaulted skies,
Day's adorn'd tomb ;
A whisper without from the briny west
Thrills and sweetens the gloom ;
Within, Miranda seeks her rest
High in her turret-room.

Armies upon her walls encamp
In silk and silver thread ;
Chased and fretted, her silver lamp
Dimly lights her bed ;

And now the silken screen is drawn,
The velvet coverlet spread ;
And the pillow of down and snowy lawn
Mantles about her head.

With violet-scented rain
Sprinkle the rushy floor ;
Let the tapestry hide the tinted pane,
And cover the chamber door ;
But leave a glimmering beam,
Miranda belamour,
To touch and gild my waking dream,
For I am your troubadour.

I sound my throbbing lyre,
And sing to myself below ;
Her damsel sits beside the fire
Crooning a song I know ;

The tapestry shakes on the wall,
The shadows hurry and go,
The silent flames leap up and fall,
And the muttering birch-logs glow.

Deep and sweet she sleeps,
Because of her love for me ;
And deep and sweet the peace that keeps
My happy heart in fee !
Peace on the heights, in the deeps,
Peace over hill and lea,
Peace through the starlit steeps,
Peace on the starlit sea,
Because a simple maiden sléeps
Dreaming a dream of me !

## A FROSTY MORNING

From heaven's high embrasure
The sun with tufted rays
Illum'd the wandering azure
And all the world's wide ways.

Usurping in its olden
Abode the fog's demesne,
In watchet weeds and golden
The still air sparkled keen.

On window-sill and door-post,
On rail and tramway rust,
Embroidery of hoar-frost
Was sewn like diamond dust.

Unthronged, or crowded densely
By people business-led,
The pavements, tuned intensely,
Rang hollow to the tread.

The traffic hurled and hammered
Down every ringing street;
Like gongs the causeys clamoured,
Like drums the asphalt beat.

While ruling o'er the olden
Abode of fog unclean,
In watchet weeds and golden
The still air sparkled keen.

## A BALLAD OF A WORKMAN

All day beneath polluted skies
He laboured in a clanging town;
At night he read with bloodshot eyes
And fondly dreamt of high renown.

'My time is filched by toil and sleep;
'My heart,' he thought, 'is clogged with dust;
My soul that flashed from out the deep,
A magic blade, begins to rust.

'For me the lamps of heaven shine;
For me the cunning seasons care;
The old undaunted sea is mine,
The stable earth, the ample air.

'Yet a dark street—at either end,
A bed, an anvil—prisons me,
Until my desperate state shall mend,
And Death, the Saviour, set me free.

'Better a hundred times to die,
And sink at once into the mould,
Than like a stagnant puddle lie
With arabesques of scum enscrolled.

'I must go forth and view the sphere
I own. What can my courage daunt?
Instead of dying daily here,
The worst is dying once of want.

'I drop the dream of high renown;
I ask but to possess my soul.'
At dawn he left the silent town,
And quaking toward the forest stole.

He feared that he might want the wit
To light on Nature's hidden hearth,
And deemed his rusty soul unfit
To win the beauty of the earth.

But when he came among the trees,
So slowly built, so many-ring'd,
His doubting thought could soar at ease
In colour steep'd, with passion wing'd.

Occult remembrances awoke
Of outlaws in the good greenwood,
And antique times of woaded folk
Began to haunt his brain and blood.

No longer hope appeared a crime:
He sang; his very heart and flesh
Aspired to join the ends of time,
And forge and mould the world afresh.

'I dare not choose to run in vain;
I must continue toward the goal.'
The pulse of life beat strong again,
And in a flash he found his soul.

'The worker never knows defeat,
Though unvictorious he may die.
The anvil and the grimy street,
My destined throne and Calvary!'

Back to the town he hastened, bent—
So swiftly did his passion change—
On selfless plans. 'I shall invent
A means to amplify the range

'Of human power: find the soul wings,
If not the body! Let me give
Mankind more mastery over things,
More thought, more joy, more will to live.'

He overtook upon the way
A tottering ancient travel-worn:
'Lend me your arm, good youth, I pray;
I scarce shall see another morn.'

Dread thought had carved his pallid face,
And bowed his form, and blanched his hair;
In every part he bore some trace,
Or some deep dint of uncouth care.

The workman led him to his room,
And would have nursed him. 'No,' he said;
'It is my self-appointed doom
To die upon a borrowed bed;

'But hear and note my slightest word.
I am a man without a name.
I saw the Bastille fall; I heard
The giant Mirabeau declaim.

'I saw the stormy dawn look pale
Across the sea-bound battle-field,
When through the hissing sleet and hail
The clarions of Cromwell pealed:

'I watched the deep-souled Puritan
Grow greater with the desperate strife:
The cannon waked; the shouting van
Charged home; and victory leapt to life.

'At Seville in the Royal square
I saw Columbus as he passed
Laurelled to greet the Catholic pair
Who had believed in him at last:

'I saw the Andalusians fill
Windows, and roofs, and balconies—
A firmament of faces still,
A galaxy of wondering eyes:

'For he had found the unknown shore,
And made the world's great dream come true:
I think that men shall never more
Know anything so strange and new.

'By meteor light when day had set
I looked across Angora's plain,
And watched the fall of Bajazet,
The victory of Tamerlane.

'In that old city where the vine
Dislodged the seaweed, once I saw
The inexorable Florentine:
He looked my way; I bent with awe

'Before his glance, for this was he
Who drained the dregs of sorrow's cup
In fierce disdain; it seemed to me
A spirit passed, my hair stood up.

'Draw nearer: breath and sight begin
To fail me: nearer, ere I die.—
I saw the brilliant Saladin,
Who taught the Christians courtesy;

'And Charlemagne, whose dreaded name,
I first in far Bokhara heard;
Mohammed, with the eyes of flame,
The lightning-blow, the thunder-word.

'I saw Him nailed upon a tree,
Whom once beside an inland lake
I had beheld in Galilee
Speaking as no man ever spake.

I saw imperial Caesar fall;
I saw the star of Macedon;
I saw from Troy's enchanted wall
The death of Priam's mighty son.

'I heard in streets of Troy at night
Cassandra prophesying fire. . . .
A flamelit face upon my sight
Flashes: I see the World's Desire!

'My life ebbs fast: nearer! I sought
A means to overmaster fate:
Me, the Egyptian Hermes taught
In old Hermopolis the Great:

'I pierced to Nature's inmost hearth,
And wrung from her with toil untold
The soul and substance of the earth,
The seed of life, the seed of gold.

'Until the end I meant to stay;
But thought has here so small a range;
And I am tired of night and day,
And tired of men who never change.

'All earthly hope ceased long ago;
Yet, like a mother young and fond
Whose child is dead, I ache to know
If there be anything beyond.

'Dark—all is darkness! Are you there?
Give me your hand.—I choose to die.
This holds my secret—should you dare;
And this, to bury me. . . . Good-bye.'

Amazement held the workman's soul;
He took the alchemist's bequest—
A light purse and a parchment scroll;
And watched him slowly sink to rest.

And nothing could he dream or think;
He went like one bereft of sense,
Till passion overbore the brink
Of all his wistful continence,

When his strange guest was laid in earth
And he had read the scroll: 'Behold,
I can procure from Nature's hearth
The Seed of Life, the Seed of Gold!

'For ever young! Now, time and tide
Must wait for me; my life shall vie
With fate and fortune stride for stride
Until the sun drops from the sky.

'Gold at a touch! Nations and kings
Shall come and go at my command;
I shall control the secret springs
Of enterprise in every land;

'And hasten on the Perfect Day:
Great men may break the galling chains;
Sweet looks light up the toilsome way;
But I alone shall hold the reins!

'All fragrance, all delightfulness,
And all the glory, all the power,
That sound and colour can express,
Shall be my ever-growing dower.

'And I shall know, and I shall love
In every age, in every clime
All beauty. . . . I, enthroned above
Humanity, the peer of Time!

'Nay—selfish! I shall give to men
The Seed of Life, the seed of Gold;
Restore the Golden Age again
At once, and let no soul grow old.

'But gold were then of no avail,
And death would cease—unhallowed doom!
The heady wine of life grow stale,
And earth become a living tomb!

'And youth would end, and truth decline,
And only pale illusion rule;
For it is death makes love divine,
Men human, life so sweet and full!'

He burnt the scroll. "I shall not cheat
My destiny. Life, death for me!
The anvil and the grimy street,
My unknown throne and Calvary!

'Only obedience can be great;
It brings the Golden Age again:
Even to be still, abiding fate,
Is kingly ministry to men!

'I drop the dream of high renown:
A nameless private in the strife,
Life, take me; take me, clanging town;
And death, the eager zest of life.

'The hammered anvils reel and chime;
The breathless, belted wheels ring true;
The workmen join the ends of time,
And forge and mould the world anew.'

## PIPER, PLAY!

Now the furnaces are out,
And the aching anvils sleep;
Down the road the grimy rout
Tramples homeward twenty deep.
Piper, play! Piper, play!
Though we be o'erlaboured men,
Ripe for rest, pipe your best!
Let us foot it once again!

Bridled looms delay their din;
All the humming wheels are spent;
Busy spindles cease to spin;
Warp and woof must rest content.

Piper, play! Piper, play!
For a little we are free!
Foot it girls and shake your curls,
Haggard creatures though we be!

Racked and soiled the faded air
Freshens in our holiday;
Clouds and tides our respite share;
Breezes linger by the way.
Piper, rest! Piper, rest!
Now, a carol of the moon!
Piper, piper, play your best!
Melt the sun into your tune!

We are of the humblest grade;
Yet we dare to dance our fill:
Male and female were we made—
Fathers, mothers, lovers still!

Piper—softly ; soft and low ;
Pipe of love in mellow notes,
Till the tears begin to flow,
And our hearts are in our throats !

Nameless as the stars of night
Far in galaxies unfurled,
Yet we wield unrivalled might,
Joints and hinges of the world !
Night and day ! night and day !
Sound the song the hours rehearse !
Work and play ! work and play !
The order of the universe !

Now the furnaces are out,
And the aching anvils sleep ;
Down the road a merry rout
Dances homeward, twenty deep.

Piper, play! Piper, play!
Wearied people though we be,
Ripe for rest, pipe your best!
For a little we are free!

## A NEW BALLAD OF TANNHÄUSER*

'WHAT hardy, tattered wretch is that
Who on our Synod dares intrude?'
Pope Urban with his council sat,
And near the door Tannhäuser stood.

His eye with light unearthly gleamed;
His yellow hair hung round his head
In elf locks lusterless: he seemed
Like one new-risen from the dead.

'Hear me, most Holy Father, tell
The tale that burns my soul within.
I stagger on the brink of hell;
No voice but yours can shrive my sin.'

* See note at the end of the book.

'Speak, sinner.' 'From my father's house
Lightly I stepped in haste for fame;
And hoped by deeds adventurous
High on the world to carve my name.

'At early dawn I took my way,
My heart with peals of gladness rang;
Nor could I leave the woods all day,
Because the birds so sweetly sang.

'But when the happy birds had gone
To rest, and night with panic fears
And blushes deep came stealing on,
Another music thrilled my ears.

'I heard the evening wind serene,
And all the wandering waters sing
The deep delight the day had been,
The deep delight the night would bring.

'I heard the wayward earth express
In one long-drawn melodious sigh
The rapture of the sun's caress,
The passion of the brooding sky.

'The air, a harp of myriad chords,
Intently murmured overhead;
My heart grew great with unsung words:
I followed where the music led.

'It led me to a mountain-chain,
Wherein athwart the deepening gloom,
High-hung above the wooded plain,
Appeared a summit like a tomb.

'Aloft a giddy pathway wound
That brought me to a darksome cave:
I heard, undaunted, underground
Wild winds and wilder voices rave,

'And plunged into that stormy world.
Cold hands assailed me impotent
In the gross darkness; serpents curled
About my limbs; but on I went.

'The wild winds buffeted my face;
The wilder voices shrieked despair;
A stealthy step with mine kept pace,
And subtle terror steeped the air.

'But the sweet sound that throbbed on high
Had left the upper world; and still
A cry rang in my heart—a cry!
For lo, far in the hollow hill,

'The dulcet melody withdrawn
Kept welling through the fierce uproar.
As I have seen the molten dawn
Across a swarthy tempest pour,

'So suddenly the magic note,
Transformed to light, a glittering brand,
Out of the storm and darkness smote
A peaceful sky, a dewy land.

'I scarce could breathe, I might not stir,
The while there came across the lea,
With singing maidens after her,
A woman wonderful to see.

'Her face—her face was strong and sweet;
Her looks were loving prophecies;
She kissed my brow: I kissed her feet—
A woman wonderful to kiss.

'She took me to a place apart
Where eglantine and roses wov
A bower, and gave me all her heart—
A woman wonderful to love.

'As I lay worshipping my bride,
While rose leaves in her bosom fell,
And dreams came sailing on a tide
Of sleep, I heard a matin bell.

'It beat my soul as with a rod
Tingling with horror of my sin;
I thought of Christ, I thought of God,
And of the fame I meant to win.

'I rose; I ran; nor looked behind;
The doleful voices shrieked despair
In tones that pierced the crashing wind;
And subtle terror warped the air.

'About my limbs the serpents curled;
The stealthy step with mine kept pace;
But soon I reached the upper world:
I sought a priest; I prayed for grace.

'He said, "Sad sinner, do you know
What fiend this is, the baleful cause
Of your dismay?" I loved her so
I never asked her what she was.

'He said, "Perhaps not God above
Can pardon such unheard-of ill:
It was the pagan Queen of Love
Who lured you to her haunted hill!

'"Each hour you spent with her was more
Than a full year? Only the Pope
Can tell what heaven may have in store
For one who seems past help and hope."

'Forthwith I took the way to Rome:
I scarcely slept; I scarcely ate:
And hither quaking am I come,
But resolute to know my fate.

45757

'Most Holy Father, save my soul! . . .
Ah God! again I hear the chime,
Sweeter than liquid bells that toll
Across a lake at vesper time . . .

'Her eyelids drop . . . I hear her sigh . . .
The roseleaves fall. . . . She falls asleep.
The cry rings in my blood—the cry
That surges from the deepest deep.

'No man was ever tempted so!—
I say not this in my defence. . . .
Help, Father, help! or I must go!
The dulcet music draws me hence!'

He knelt—he fell upon his face.
Pope Urban said, 'The eternal cost
Of guilt like yours eternal grace
Dare not remit: your soul is lost.

'When this dead staff I carry grows
Again and blossoms, heavenly light
May shine on you.' Tannhäuser rose;
And all at once his face grew bright.

He saw the emerald leaves unfold,
The emerald blossoms break and glance;
They watched him, wondering to behold
The rapture of his countenance.

The undivined, eternal God
Looked on him from the highest heaven,
And showed him by the budding rod
There was no need to be forgiven.

He heard melodious voices call
Across the world, an elfin shout;
And when he left the council-hall,
It seemed a great light had gone out.

With anxious heart, with troubled brow,
The Synod turned upon the Pope.
They saw; they cried, 'A living bough,
A miracle, a pledge of hope!'

And Urban trembling saw: 'God's way
Is not as man's,' he said. 'Alack!
Forgive me, gracious heaven, this day
My sin of pride. Go, bring him back.'

But swift as thought Tannhäuser fled,
And was not found. He scarcely slept;
He scarcely ate; for overhead
The ceaseless, dulcet music kept

Wafting him on. And evermore
The foliate staff he saw at Rome
Pointed the way; and the winds bore
Sweet voices whispering him to come.

The air, a world-enfolding flood
Of liquid music poured along;
And the wild cry within his blood
Became at last a golden song.

'All day,' he sang—'I feel all day
The earth dilate beneath my feet;
I hear in fancy far away
The tidal heart of ocean beat.

'My heart amasses as I run
The depth of heaven's sapphire flower;
The resolute, enduring sun
Fulfils my soul with splendid power.

'I quiver with divine desire;
I clasp the stars; my thoughts immerse
Themselves in space; like fire in fire
I melt into the universe.

'For I am running to my love:
The eager roses burn below;
Orion wheels his sword above,
To guard the way God bids me go.'

At dusk he reached the mountain chain,
Wherein athwart the deepening gloom,
High hung above the wooded plain
The Hörselberg rose like a tomb.

He plunged into the under-world;
Cold hands assailed him impotent
In the gross darkness; serpents curled
About his limbs; but on he went.

The wild winds buffeted his face;
The wilder voices shrieked despair;
A stealthy step with his kept pace;
And subtle terror steeped the air.

But once again the magic note,
Transformed to light, a glittering brand,
Out of the storm and darkness smote
A peaceful sky, a dewy land.

And once again he might not stir,
The while there came across the lea
With singing maidens after her
The Queen of Love so fair to see.

Her happy face was strong and sweet;
Her looks were loving prophecies;
She kissed his brow; he kissed her feet—
He kissed the ground her feet did kiss.

She took him to a place apart
Where eglantine and roses wove
A bower, and gave him all her heart—
The Queen of Love, the Queen of Love.

As he lay worshipping his bride
While rose-leaves in her bosom fell,
And dreams came sailing on a tide
Of sleep, he heard a matin-bell.

'Hark! Let us leave the magic hill,'
He said, 'And live on earth with men.'
'No; here,' she said, 'we stay, until
The Golden Age shall come again.'

And so they wait, while empires sprung
Of hatred thunder past above,
Deep in the earth for ever young
Tannhäuser and the Queen of Love.

His heart was worn and sore ;
He was old before his time ;
He had wasted half his life.

Night—it was always night,
And never a star above :
But the ring of a manly stroke,
The flash of a gentle look,
The touch of a comrade's hand
Groping for his on the march,
Were more to him than the day.

At the thought of his youth,
At the pulse of love,
At the swoop of death,
He sang aloud in the dark,
And touched the heart of the world.

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